Social and Economic Aspects of Planning
Inventory Data
Collecting New Social Data

PRESENTER: So that kind of end the section on use of secondary information, existing information for social and economic aspects of planning in terms of the data collection phase.

What I want to talk about somewhat briefly is, okay, well, what are some viable options for going out and collecting new social data? And I want to talk about just three types of things. I want to talk a little about interviews and focus groups and surveys, and I'm not going to go into any of them in excruciating detail, but just to give you a brief flavor for the types of information you can get in each. And then after I do this, Joan is going to give a couple examples from her experience working on the Dillon RMP of how she collected new data from people and how that was used in the planning effort. Both the good and the bad points, right, Joan in and the ugly ones.

This is -- incidentally, I have a couple photos here of some our research settings. This is one of our interviewers, Amy Goff, interviewing some Filipino crew on a long line boat, and this was a very interesting study, which is not atypical of some kind of anthropological efforts of research that we undertake, and she spent a couple years down on the docks at night on fishing boats drinking beer and talking story and eating every conceivable part of the fish and other marine species with the fishermen, and we did compile notes from these in a systematic manner, but the research itself was participant observation, interview, focus group, a little survey type research thrown in. So a whole lot of kind of

combination of different methods. But what we found in this instance was that it really took a lot of time before people would open up and talk honestly and talk openly. There had to be trust there. There had to be mutual understanding, mutual dialogue before we learned, really, anything of substantial value that we could have confidence in and apply toward management.

So I'm going to talk about interviews. Here's another, by the way -- here's another interesting interview setting. We went down to American Samoa and did a course on socioeconomic monitoring, and as part of that we led people through every aspect of the research process from why do social research at all to going collecting data, developing questionnaires, analyzing data, writing reports. And so you see here a couple of our students interviewing a guy in a little village on Tutwila wearing the traditional lava lava. This was kind of fun. And they were really into social research once they found out what it could do, and we taught them just enough to be dangerous, and now they're doing all kinds of social research, and we're trying to kind of keep track of it and help them out as best we can.

So social research is something you can kind of get excited about once you start doing it and once you see all of the wonderful information it can give you.

So, interviews can be done easily in a field setting. They're great. Can be used to describe social practices, tap into local knowledge, identify issues. You know, a lot of times people are more comfortable with one on one communication. You

can develop a little dialogue even in a short period of time, especially if you know somebody, and interviews can take a wide range of forms. They can be -- you could consider sitting in a coffee shop and talking story with a county commissioner as an interview or you can be a little more formal and try and talk to a number of different people with kind of maybe a roughly defined interview guide. Interviews work best when you're not doing a rigorous systematic questionnaire but where you have a series of topics, maybe, that you want to discuss with a variety of people, but you want to learn -- you want to hear from them what they want to talk about and what they know the most about. So typically -- you know, you can administer surveys one to one, but the real value in this technique is learning what people have to tell you. So you have to be a little flexible in how you approach the interview, and that way you'll get some of the information you want, you'll cover some of the topics you want, but you'll really let them to some extent dictate the topics based on their interests and their knowledge of the issues.

Focus groups are -- how many people have run a focus group or participated in a focus group or used focus group information? A few. Okay. The value in -- well, I'll quick describe what they are. A focus group is where you're a researcher or an interviewer or somebody is sitting down with a group of people and having a discussion based on one or more topics with the people all there present at once. So obviously the value of this type of information collection is in the nature of the group, the dialogue that takes place among the group members, because the group will evolve on its own and will discuss a topic back and forth and so you

will learn more, and people will evolve, and their attitudes can evolve as part of the discussion of the group, and it's hearing this interaction that is of the greatest value.

And so if you want to understand, for example, more clearly the views of a group of people, such as ranchers, you know, you might get a group of ranchers together and learn more by talking to them as a set than you would by talking to each of them individually, because they will be able to interact with each other and one will explain a point that the other brings up and they'll play off of each other.

So this is -- there's a guy named John Russell who has done a lot of work for the Forest Service who has published some very interesting studies of ranchers and other stakeholder groups of Forest Service and BLM lands, and it's really -- it's very qualitative, but with just a relatively small number of focus groups you can develop a very deep understanding of a set of values or a set of values and beliefs and attitudes of a group of people.

Now, obviously the danger here is that you take that information and assume it's true for all ranchers, you know, in your whole study area, and so the value of focus groups, and to some extent interviews, is you can get some pretty deep information, but you're kind of left wondering how broadly it applies across the population of people you're interested in studying and in learning something about.

What I found -- as a researcher we use focus groups a lot to help test our questionnaires. If we're going out with a survey, for example, of a large group of people, if we can get a few members of that population whose views we're going to solicit and talk to them all together, you know, we show them the questionnaire, we have them take it individually, and then we go through the whole thing and they discuss it. What was clear? What was unclear? What did they understand about it? What did they not understand? What left them feeling confused? How did they feel about the experience of going and taking this questionnaire? And hearing them discuss it as a group is invaluable to a researcher as kind of a pretest to make sure that things are ordered correctly, things are worded correctly, that you're not missing some huge area of content that's of great concern to this group of people that you might want to add to your questionnaire.

So it's really fascinating. And what I've seen among Resource Managers and others is a tendency to get really captivated by this technique once they see the depth that information that can be produced from it, and so the tendency might be to rely on it a little too much or to generalize it a little too much to a population. So I want to caution you not to do that because you will be enamored of the results, I'll guarantee it.

You know, during development of the grazing regulations, I have a quote here, and I bring it up here because focus groups were used as part of this process,

and the next slide deals with those focus groups. You know, promoting more effective and efficient management of public lands grazing, a vital part of the history economy and social identity of western rural communities and the preferred alternative specifically talked about social and economic and cultural effects of changes. And one way that the BLM learned about those social and cultural and economic issues was to have a series of focus groups with different groups of people. Some with grazing permitees, recreation users, environmental and conservation group representatives, and they had them at different plays in the west because they wanted to capture some regional differences, and the results were used to help kind of shape some of the language in those regulations and to gain a better understanding of grazing issues from these several different perspectives. So in this instance the use of focus groups was very helpful in developing and assessing those regulations. So this is not a technique that is new to the BLM.

CLASS PARTICIPANT: [inaudible] people in the same room --

PRESENTER: That's something you can vary. It depends on what you want to learn. You know, sometimes you'll just have people from the same group or from the same population you're interested in, you know. In this case you could have the -- a bunch of representatives from local and national environmental organizations all in the same room, and they're going to have different opinions, but -- and the purpose of the focus group is to hear them interact and hear just how similar or dissimilar their interests and values are with respect to grazing

regulations. And that's probably a little more common, I would guess, than -- is to have the -- you know, a group of similar people and hear them interact, but you can also do it the other way and just mix them all up and watch the sparks fly. That can be kind of fun, too.

You know, with -- and if you do that over time, of course, you know, we've run -- for various planning projects we've had task forces where you have all of the stakeholder groups represented, and the lesson from that is don't expect anything to emerge that's of any value whatsoever except for a lot of posturing until you've been meeting quite a while, and those are long-term efforts, and the goal is to maybe reach some level of agreement, maybe on a management plan or on a set of actions, although, the federal advisory committee act obviously plays a role there where you would never say that your goal is consensus of all these nongovernmental people that you have in a room together. Unless they're a sanctioned body. But, you know, it can be very interesting to get these disparate people talking, too. And the dialogue is really usually pretty civil in that type of setting. So it depends on your goal and on what you hope to learn.

Surveys are great. I love surveys because they can tell you things that you just cannot learn any other way, right? Here you have the opportunity to survey a population of interest, whether it's local residents or regional residents or ranchers or members of a group or whatever your population of interest is, but you have the opportunity to collect some information and then say: This is what this group thinks, you know w this level of statistical accuracy. So you are

actually going out and you are able to represent the views of a population with a properly designed and administered survey.

And so one advantage of this in the management and policy arena is that survey results in general are going to have more credibility and a little more weight. Decision makers are going to feel a little more comfortable if you can say within this level of error this represents the views of this population, these results. You know, rather than reading a bunch of quotes from ranchers and a description of their attitudes toward a set of management actions, for example. And so you have to be careful how you use the results of all of these but it's not atypical to, say, have some focus groups to learn to help design a survey, conduct a survey, and then maybe have a couple of focus groups afterwards to help you interpret the results of the survey and add a little color to your analysis. So kind of the qualitative focus group approach works really well in combination with a more quantitative survey approach.

And, of course, another advantage of surveys is you can collect economic information. You can do willingness to pay studies, which John will talk about and has mentioned briefly, as well as collect social information, and I've worked with John and a number of other economists over the years, both contributing items to a survey, and John will have his economic stuff to measure values and I'll have my social stuff to kind of determine and identify the social and psychological basis for those values so that when John says, "Well, here's the final number," you know, it's not just hanging out there. We have good social

and psychological evidence of why that number is valid and why that value exists in society, because we've collected it from the people. So they work quite well in tandem.

That is a very quick overview of just some of the types of information and some of the information collection techniques and why you might want to do one or more of them, remembering, of course, that any time you do collect information from a group of people it sets you into a bit of a bureaucratic nightmare in terms of survey approval.

You know, one -- one -- universities can collect this information and consultants can collect this information any time they want, you know, if they're not getting federal funds to do it and if they're not federal employees. So sometimes what you see is maybe a university doing some research that they think will be of value to a federal agency and then the federal agency can purchase the results in a report if they want. So there's a number of arrangements like that that work, and we can certainly see if we have partners that are willing to do surveys under that basis or maybe they meet multiple needs, including ours, and we don't have to fund it. Or sponsor it or direct it. So that's legit, too. So there's some ways to deal with the OMB requirement. But it's generally more difficult to get approval to conduct surveys these days, as Vicki is finding, and the automatic blanket approval for three years that used to be kind of easy is now not as easy for a lot of long-range survey efforts. So it's kind of discouraging, frankly, as a federal social scientist to face barriers like this toward doing our work done and

collecting information that is designed to promote better decision making for the benefit of the American public and running into the Paper Work Reduction Act which had good intents but is a real barrier to informed decision making.

So with that I will get off my soapbox and ask if there's any quick questions on any of this before Joan talks about Dillon?

CLASS PARTICIPANT: Are there surveys right now that have been approved by OMB that we can like download or something?

PRESENTER: Sure. There's a number of -- you know, I don't have a list, unfortunately, but one -- there's a number of national surveys, like the national survey on recreation in the environment, which has -- which is kind of interesting, and you can just -- I don't have the website offhand. I could call it up, but I think I'm kind of over my time limit. Maybe later we can do that and I can show you the site. But that is a survey that's done every few years, and the results are identified regionally as well as nationally. So surveys like that at least are good for setting a context for the region you're in, you know, and presenting things at a regional level and you can't go down to a site level that from survey, but there are a number of national surveys analyzed regionally like that. And then you just need to kind of check in your area, you know. A local university, whatever Department is involved in social research, is a good place to start, and they should know about any surveys that have recently been done in your area because they're regularly done. Chambers of commerce do surveys and

counties do surveys and all kinds of agencies.